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Job crafting as a work adjustment strategy for workers returning after long-term sickness absence due to common mental disorders

Running head: Job crafting for sustainable return to work

International Journal of Rehabilitation Research

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the way workers with common mental disorders use job crafting to adjust their work to their levels of functioning after returning from long-term sick leave. Thirty-eight workers who had returned within the last 24 months from sickness absence due to common mental disorders were interviewed using semi-structured interviews. Questions were asked about how they job crafted to match their changed needs for work functioning post-return. To interpret the results we coded the data according to the Wrzesniewski and Dutton typology of job crafting and conducted thematic analysis. We identified task, relational and cognitive job crafting strategies that workers had employed after returning to work. Our findings have important implications for how managers and organizations can support workers to make adjustments that enable them to stay and thrive at work with reduced work functioning.

**Keywords:** return to work; job crafting; qualitative study; common mental disorders

Returning after sickness absence due to common mental disorders: Job crafting to create a job that allows returned workers to return and function at work

## Introduction

Common Mental Disorders (CMDs) such as stress, anxiety and depression are costly to individuals, families, workplaces and society. In the OECD countries, approximately 15% of the working population suffer from CMDs, resulting in long-term sickness absence for about half of this population (OECD, 2014). Even a successful return does not guarantee a sustainable return whereby workers to stay and function at work. Sustainable return to work is often defined as a relatively short period, e.g. three months after return with little consideration for what happens after the individual returns (Etukmwa *et al.* 2019).

Koopmans *et al.* (2011) found almost one in five returned workers had a recurrence of sickness absence due to CMDs over a period of seven years, 90% of which occurred within 3 years. Norder *et al.* (2015) found that 29% of returned employees had recurrences over a ten-year period. Exploring the extent to which employees stayed in employment, Norder *et al.* (2017) found that 18% of returned employees had left employment five years post-RTW, 25% of these resigned, 30% were dismissed, 6% were granted disability pension and 31% retired early.

Evidence suggests that returned workers with CMDs suffer from reduced work functioning, even after remission (Arends *et al.*, 2014; de Vries *et al.*, 2015; Norder *et al.*, 2017; Ubalde-Lopez *et al.*, 2017). Common symptoms of CMDs include difficulties concentrating and remembering, anxiety when being in large crowds and attending social events, and difficulties making decisions (American Psychological Society, 2013), all of these symptoms influence how individuals function at work. Workers experiencing reduced work functioning need to make adjustments – or craft a job that fits their needs and their reduced work functioning to enable them to both sustain their ability to work and manage their health. In

the present paper, we use job crafting as our theoretical framework to explore how workers returning after long-term sickness absence due to CMDs make adjustments to their job so that it meets their changed needs.

Job crafting can be defined as the “physical and cognitive changes individuals make in the task or the relational boundaries of their job that individuals make to shape a job that meet their needs (Wrzesniewski and Dutton, 2001, p. 2001). Wrzesniewski and Dutton (2001) distinguished between three types of job crafting. First, task job crafting refers to changing the number, scope, and type of job tasks. Second, relational job crafting refers to changing the quality and/or amount of interactions with others encountered in the job and finally cognitive job crafting refers to changing the way workers see their job.

Few studies have focused on job crafting in relation to sustainable return to work. A recent review by Etuknwa *et al.* (2019) identified two papers of interest (Bond and Bunce, 2006; Johansson et al, 2006), however, on closer inspection neither of these papers were directly related to job crafting for returned workers. In the following paper, we conducted in-depth interviews to identify ways of job crafting returned workers engage in to craft a job that meets their needs after return with reduced work functioning. Based on the Wrzesniewski and Dutton (2001) job crafting definition and the subsequent research confirming the prevalence of the three types of job crafting – task, relational and cognitive job crafting - (Slemp and Vella-Brodrick, 2013), we formulated three research questions to examine how returned workers may engage in these different types of job crafting:

- (1) What kinds of task job crafting do returned workers employ to allow them to function at work despite reduced work functioning?
- (2) What kinds of relational job crafting do returned workers employ to allow them to function at work despite reduced work functioning?

- (3) What kinds of cognitive changes do returned workers employ to allow them to function at work despite reduced work functioning?

## **Methods**

### **Study design**

The study employed a qualitative study design. A convenience sample of 38 returned workers in the UK was studied. Table 1 provides an overview of participants' demographic information together with information of how long workers had been back at work.

### **Procedure**

After obtaining ethics approval from the University's ethics board, returned workers were recruited through social media; LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter, a large public sector organization and organizations supporting individuals with CMDs. Inclusion criteria were that returned workers had been diagnosed with a CMD, they had been off sick for more than three weeks due to their CMD and that they had returned to work in the past 24 months. As it has been argued that CMDs can be adjusted for in the workplace (OECD, 2014), we focused on this population and excluded severe mental disorders such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorders (OECD, 2014). The participants signed a written consent form that emphasized confidentiality and the right of participants. Each participant was allocated a code including which month they returned (e.g. P4-M4). Semi-structured interviews were conducted asking returned workers about their return to work journey and the resources that had helped them function at work post-return including what they had done themselves to craft a job that fit their needs. Interviews lasted between 20 and 97 minutes with an average of 58 minutes. Data were transcribed verbatim and coded in NVivo to facilitate analysis. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) after coding according to task, relational and cognitive job crafting (Wrzesniewski and Dutton, 2001).

## Results

### Task job crafting

Returned workers reported problems with lack of concentration and feeling overwhelmed by an unstructured work day where they had to make decisions on which tasks to do when. To craft a job that provided them with a better structure, they engaged in a range of task job crafting strategies. To address feeling overwhelmed by unstructured tasks, they created structure to the work day and broke tasks into smaller subtasks. One participant described it as follows: ‘I just try to be as planned and as organized, because that certainly helps me feel a little bit more kind of in control and not stressed about things.....it stops me kind of spiralling out of thinking, you know, I’ve not done that, I’ve not done this and I’ve not done that, so if I’m planned, I’ve got my lists and organized my week, and I’m all kind of planned, that certainly helps’ (P11-M11).

Another employee explained it this way:

‘I have a list of all the job tasks I’m dealing with and where I am with things, and where there is anything outstanding, it's in red, that gets left on my desk, all sorts of things to make things easier for everyone else. It makes things easier for me as well, because I can see at a glance what I need to do.’ (P18-M13)

Returned workers also reported being more aware of work not getting on top of them. After return they had crafted a less stressful job and focused only on doing core tasks. One participant explained: ‘One of the things I did when I came back was like look at all of the kind of additional things that I either had already agreed to do or wanted to do for myself...And I was like “I don't need to do these things, I might want to do them and they might be fun, but they are not necessary and going for a walk with a podcast is maybe as fun as writing a blog but

probably better for my mental health than writing a blog when I've already been sat at a desk for 6 or 7 hours' (P13-M3). Another strategy to not become overwhelmed was to create small breaks between tasks that allowed them to clear their head. One participant described this: 'Whilst still meeting my role and obligations, I think about allowing the space between meetings, and not going from one to the next to the next, and having no time to kind of have a lunch, have a drink, get out of that headspace into another one. So yeah, so I think how I think about...how I manage my work has changed significantly' (P15-M1).

Another way returned workers crafted to avoid work getting on top of them was to create clear boundaries between work and home. They stopped checking their emails and bringing their laptops home with them. They also stopped working excessive hours: 'I'm sure most people would say they're their own worst enemy, and I am, and it has been a change...you know, working for years where, you know, I come and do an hour extra, or stay a bit longer to get things completed because I don't want to feel I've let anybody down, now I'm trying to stick to my times at work' (P14-M24). Another participant put it like this: 'In terms of how I'm approaching work compared to how I have done previously, yes, there's quite a few differences. I'm being very strict with the hours that I'm doing. So monitoring my hours really closely and sticking to the exact phased return which is only ramping up by one hour per week.' (P22-M1)

### **Relational job crafting**

A common symptom of CMDs is social anxiety and feeling overwhelmed in social contexts. A number of different job crafting strategies were reported by returned workers, depending on their possibilities to seek isolation. Some workers would work from home, others would work in other parts of the workplace away from their nearest colleagues, e.g., university employees would work in another part of the campus. Where workers were required to stay at their desk, they would try to minimize distractions by wearing earphones. Another way of managing



relationships with others would be to restrict the number of meetings they attended. Returned workers also tried to manage colleagues' expectations of interaction by being open about how they felt to avoid negative actions: 'if I feel like I'm not having a good day, my immediate colleague who I work with very closely on a daily basis, I will say to her, look, today's a bit tough, so if I'm quieter, that's what it is, it's nothing personal to you, it's because I'm just struggling a bit, you know' (P18-M13). Another participant explained: 'I actively control the way I deal with people. If I start feeling emotional I actually sit myself down and have a talk, and say, this has not worked in the past so don't do it now, and work out a way around it.' (P10-M4)

Relating to task job crafting, returned workers reported that they worked to set expectations of colleagues to prevent work overload. One participant explained: 'where I've been put on a module with two other members of staff, I've been able to say, look, I've only got four hours that I'm gonna be in this week and in.. in reality I can do this much and I can't do anymore whereas previously, I would've have been just yes, yes, yes, and worked a number of hours it took to get it done' (P22-M1). Or using out-of-office reply to make it clear days they do not work: 'So little things like my email sign-off tells you my working hours, so you know clearly I'm not going to be around on a Friday, I put out of office messages on when I'm not here on a Friday' (P18-M13)

### **Cognitive job crafting**

Many returned workers also reported engaging in cognitive job crafting. Prior to going on sick leave many had worked long hours, work had played a major role in their lives and their identity had evolved around work. After returning to work they had readjusted their views on the job and started focusing on areas of life. One participant described it like this: 'I will take days off, like yesterday I took a day off to go and visit my friend in Aberdeen, like you know we just went down to visit her little boy. And I think it's being able to say my life is bigger than my

job, my life is bigger than my work...So it's really being able to prioritize myself over my work and by myself I mean me, but also the rest of my life' (P13-M3). Another way of cognitively job crafting post-return to work was to focus on their own expectations, rather than trying to meet others' expectations: 'How I think about work, that's changed the most. That I don't have to respond to every email there and then, or before I go home at the end of the day, because they'll still be there tomorrow, and it's nothing urgent. And actually saying, no, I can't do this for whatever reason, whether it's...because before I'd kind of adjust my diary to make sure I meet everybody else's needs rather than my own, whereas now I take much more of a...some may call it selfish, but I plan my diary for my needs now' (P15-M1).

High level cognitive job crafting could also be observed whereby some returned workers had tried to change their CMD experiences into something positive. Some now saw it as part of their role at the workplace to support colleagues with CMDs: 'I am almost like a changed person, and I know I am because I'm doing things like, we have a staff mental health network within the workplace, I'm part of that now. I'm out there advocating for mental health to be very open and people to be able to talk about it' (P18-M13).

## **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to examine how workers who had returned after long-term sickness absence due to CMDs crafted their job to fit their work functioning. We used a qualitative study design to identify these job crafting behaviors relating to the task, to relations at work and changing perceptions of the job. We found that such job crafting took place and our results have important implications for research and practice.

### **Implication for research**

Our findings make a significant contribution to the understanding of how returned workers with CMDs craft their job to function at work post-return. We extend the study of Johansson

*et al.* (2006) by identifying concrete changes to the job and to the way of seeing the job role. Johansson *et al.* (2006) explored changes to the job tasks in terms of the amount and scheduling of work tasks, however, we extended the understanding of task job crafting by providing knowledge of how workers made adjustments to structuring the work into subtasks to meet their needs after reduced work functioning. Johansson *et al.* (2006) only explored whether returned workers engaged in relational job crafting through asking for help. We found that this was less often the case as strategies were often self-initiated. One symptom of CMDs is social anxiety and we found that returned workers employed different strategies for reducing emotional demands. Job crafting to reduce emotional demands has only received limited attention in the job crafting literature, only one of the many job crafting scales include reducing emotional demands (Nielsen *et al.*, 2017). We add to the job crafting literature by providing examples of how workers job craft to reduce emotional demands. We also extend the Johansson *et al.* (2006) study as we found that workers reported reduced work functioning on a daily basis and job crafting accordingly rather than just on days where workers felt low.

### **Implications for practice**

Our results have important implications for practice. Returned workers reported being able to craft their jobs, but autonomy to do so is crucial. Returned workers also report using a broad range of job crafting strategies so it is vital that workers have the decision latitude to make the necessary adjustments. Colleagues, line managers and Human Resources (HR) can play an important role in supporting this job crafting. Our results also show the importance of a dialogue, work adjustments need to be feasible and realistic within the organizational context. Policies that enable flexible working patterns and support a long-term perspective of sustainable return to work are important. Line managers need to lead return to work conversations, where workers are encouraged to consider what task, relational and cognitive

job crafting strategies would be most helpful to them. These adjustments need to be reviewed on an ongoing basis to ensure a continued fit to the level of functioning of the worker, while care needs to be taken that the work adjustments are made to allow workers to craft their job without the detriment of their colleagues.

### **Strengths and limitations**

The main strength of the present study is the large sample size for a qualitative study. About 12-15 interviews are generally recommended for thematic analysis (Clarke, Braun and Heyfield, 2015), however, due to the diversity of participants' return experiences with continued until we had reached saturation (Clarke et al., 2015). We must also acknowledge the limitations of our study which may impact the conclusions we can draw. First, due to self-selection, our study participants are not representative of the general population. Despite the large sample size, we only had one blue collar worker, one working in administration and one in private business/consultancy. The job crafting strategies used did not differ across job roles and we therefore do not consider this a major issue. Second, our study participants were interviewed between 1 and 13 months post-return. This diversity could mean that workers changed job crafting strategies over time, however, for the job crafting strategies reported in this study we found them consistent across participants regardless of the length of time back at work. We have highlighted this in our analyses by including quotes from people who were interviewed at different time points after return.

### **Conclusion**

The contributions of the study are twofold. First, we contribute to the understanding of how workers with CMDs craft a job post-return to work that fits their reduced work functioning. Second, we contribute to the larger job crafting literature by providing examples of job crafting for a particular group of workers, namely workers with CMDs. It is our hope that

this research can provide valuable information to managers and Human Resources on how to support workers making the necessary adjustments to enable them to stay and thrive at work after long-term sickness absence due to CMDs.

Table 1: Participants' background information

Variables	<i>n</i>	percentage
Age group (years)		
25-34	4	
35-44	11	
45-54	16	
>55	5	
Undisclosed	2	
Gender		
Female	20	53%
Male	18	47%
Months since return		
One month	13	
Two to six months	15	
Seven to 12 months	0	
>13 months	10	
Job roles		
Administration	1	
Managerial	8	
Education and research	7	
Police	6	
Health	2	
Information technology	2	
Consultancy/Private business	1	
Manual labour	1	

Figure 1: Job crafting strategies

Task job crafting	Relational job crafting	Cognitive job crafting
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•Creating structure in the work day</li><li>•Identifying discrete sub-tasks</li><li>•Identifying and prioritizing core tasks</li><li>•Taking small breaks between tasks</li><li>•Prioritizing a clear demarcation between work and leisure time</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•Adapting the physical environment to limit social interaction including working from home, using quiet spaces, use of earphones</li><li>•Changing work location according to task</li><li>•Setting expectations of work functioning and capacity with colleagues</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•Placing a conscious focus on life, not just work</li><li>•Setting realistic expectations about the job for oneself (and not others)</li><li>•Supporting others with CMDs</li></ul>

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